

VZCZCXRO4072

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RUEHLM RUEHLZ RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHVB #0431 1230639
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 030639Z MAY 07
FM AMEMBASSY ZAGREB
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7628
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS ZAGREB 000431

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [HR](#) [POLITICAL PARTIES](#)

SUBJECT: END OF AN ERA: DEATH OF OPPOSITION LEADER AND FORMER PRIME MINISTER IVICA RACAN

¶11. (U) Ivica Racan - the first and so far only President of the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP) -- died April 29 of cancer at the age of 63. Three weeks earlier, Racan resigned as SDP president, after his health took a turn for the worse. While his funeral will be a private event, hundreds of officials and members of the public attended a May 2 memorial service in Zagreb. President Mesic, PM Sanader and most other high-ranking state officials participated, as did foreign statesmen such as Gerhardt Schroeder of Germany and Milan Kucan of Slovenia. Ambassador Bradtke represented the Embassy at the service.

¶12. (U) Racan played a central role in Croatia's recent history. He led the Croatian communists away from the Yugoslav League dominated by Slobodan Milosevic in 1990. A few months later, he authorized Croatia's first multi-party elections and ensured a peaceful transfer of power to the winning Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) led by Franjo Tudjman. While in opposition, Racan led the party through reform toward a modern party of social democrats. In 2000, he returned to power as Prime Minister, leading a left-of-center six-party coalition. During that period, Croatia was embraced again as a full member of the international community, a worthy candidate for membership in the EU and NATO.

¶13. (SBU) Although often criticized for a lack of decisiveness, Racan in fact promoted and practiced the art of governing by compromise, as the only possible way to keep a coalition government together. At the same time, he continued for 17 years to be the indisputable authority in his own party. This becomes even more evident now that the SDP must elect a new leader, who will face a major challenge just a few months later, as parliamentary elections are expected in November. So far two candidacies have been officially announced: former foreign minister Tonino Picula, and former assistant foreign minister Zoran Milanovic. SDP Vice-President Zeljka Antunovic is expected to run, but she has yet to state her intentions.

BRADTKE